HOLY TERROR
Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11
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The Exorcist is on television this week. After several years as one of Hollywood's top money-makers, the film, about a little girl progressively possessed by Satan, continues to elicit something more than sustained interest - something bordering on fascination. The American people may say they do not believe in the devil or assorted demons, but we are certainly enamoured with the subject. As a matter of fact, if we didn't keep denying it, a perfectly objective observer might conclude that we were utterly obsessed with it. We can't wait, it seems, to pay our money to Hollywood to scare us to death.

It is one of the significant curiosities of our time. On the one hand we appear to be entirely rational, logical, skeptical people who have created a highly technilogical culture and sophisticated way of life. Superstitions have no place among us. On the other hand we dearly love movies like The Exorcist. The occult is big business, the most bizarre forms of witchcraft are experiencing a renaissance, millions of us consult astrology columns and buy books on astrology. We have made Jeanne Dixon into a celebrity and Science Fiction is acknowledged to be serious literature. In religion, we are fascinated by Transcendental Meditation, Yoga and other mystical Eastern theologies and one of the more dynamic and perplexing phenomena in the Christian Church is the Charismatic movement; so named because its adherents become possessed by the Holy Spirit and exhibit mysterious behavior, like speaking in tongues.

There is something in us, it seems, that needs a dose of the supernatural: we will express that need in one way or another, if not in our religion, then elsewhere. The phenomenon has certainly been around a long time. Biblical scholars are utterly fascinated with references to the supernatural, the mysterious, the divine manifesting itself in human experience: Moses and the burning bush, for instance, or on Mt. Sinai, covered with clouds, with lightning and thunder, a vivid experience of the reality of God, shepherds in the field outside Bethlehem hearing the angels, the disciples of Jesus experiencing His transfiguration, the conversion of Saul on the Damascus road. All of these experiences have been accompanied by fear on the part of the people who have witnessed them. The prototype passage is the one from Isaiah we heard this morning. The prophet was in the Temple and in an experience which became his summons to ministry saw God, and felt the earth shake and heard voices and felt a burning coal on his lips. Isaiah's reaction is important: "Woe is me! For I am lost." I can understand that. There is something about the experience that was disturbing, disquieting, frightening.

In the New Testament lesson this morning, Jesus' disciples were fishing at night and had caught nothing. When he suggested they put into deeper water they encountered a shoal of fish and caught so many they almost capsized the boat. That phenomenon so affected Peter that he fell down on his knees and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." Peter sensed something going on here beyond the normal human phenomenon. As he did throughout, Peter seems to have been sensitive to the holy, the divine in Jesus. And, frankly, it scared him to death. He didn't want to have anything to do with it. It was literally, "holy terror".

Ancient people lived with a kind of primal fear. Afraid of wild animals, storms, disease, they lived in terror of the unknown which, for them, encompassed almost everything they perceived. In addition to this primal fear, people have always been afraid of the deity, His wrath and punishment. Martin Luther, for instance, began his spiritual pilgrimage in terror at God's anger over his sin. Perceptive people, intellectuals, have written about it. The philosopher Pascal, for instance: "When I consider the briefness of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after it...I am afraid... Who has set me here? By whose order and arrangement have this place and this time been allotted me?" (Pensee's).

Every Seminary student must read the definitive study by a very scholarly German, Rudolph Otto, under the title, The Idea of the Holy. Otto called it the "Numen - or Numinous", the "Mysterium Tremendum" and observed: "The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may burst in sudden eruption from the depths of the soul...It may become the hushed trembling and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of - whom or what? In the presence of that which is a mystery inexpressible and above all creatures." (Ibid., p. 12/13).

The testimony of history is that human beings sense, somewhere deep inside themselves, that which is greater: that which cannot be explained by the mind alone. In the face of the Holy, the "Mysterium Tremendum", or God, if you will, the response most common is awe, reverence, fear, dread, "holy terror". The experience is authentic and perhaps even very healthy. In fact something important about us gets lost when the experience is no longer available.

The trouble is that the culture in which we live is secular to the point of either denying all of that or outrightly contradicting it. We are first of all, altogether too rational. Nurtured on the scientific method, we have concluded that if you can't weigh and measure it, it can't be true. Scientists, by the way, don't believe that. They deal with things like quarks, quasars, and black holes. They know, that is to say, about the unknown. It is the lay person who is persuaded to buy toothpaste because an actor in a white coat pulls a three ringed binder from the shelf and intones the sacred litany, "Laboratory tests show..."

British theologian J.S.Whale wrote: "The greatest danger we run is that we put a pipe in our mouth and our feet on the mantle and sit down in an armchair to discuss theories of atonement instead of bowing down before the wounds of Christ; that we scurry round the burning bush taking photographs from suitable angles instead of taking the shoes from our feet because the place whereon we stand is Holy Ground". (Christian Doctrine).

No one brought more intellectual muscle to bear on religion than Pascal. No one struggled harder. And he concluded: "If one subjects everything to reason our religion will lose its mystery and its supernatural character. If one offends the principle of reason, our religion will be absurd and ridiculous. There are two equally dangerous extremes, to shut reason out and to let nothing else in." (Rudolf Otto, ob.cit., Preface to). I argued last Sunday for common sense in religion: for theology based on the very best thinking we can do. I suggested that truth commends itself and that we should examine every idea with great care. This week, I want to suggest that we are required to balance intellect with emotion, what we know and can understand with the reality of what we don't know and can't understand. I want to argue that the wisest thing we can do is be open to awe, mystery, perhaps even a little fear. We do not, in fact, know it all. Lewis Thomas, President of the Memorial Sloane Kettering Cancer Center in New York has published an absolutely delightful collection of essays, "The Lives of a Cell", most of which make that point. In one of them he suggests that we agree to suspend all further research into how best to destroy life until "we have acquired a complete set of information concerning at least one living thing". Then at least we will know what we are killing. He proposes a simple one, the protozoan, Myxotricha papadoxa which lives on the digestive tract of Australian termites. Dr. Thomas knows that we really don't know much at all! P.26).

In another essay Thomas pokes gentle fun at the presumptuousness of modern humankind. Nothing is so arrogant, and so wrong, he suggests, than the ecological warning that we are endangering life in the ecosystem. Life is durable, he suggests. Life will go on.

We are the delicate part. the weak link. Human life is transient, vulnerable. Fear for the snail darter, that is to say, but reserve your holy terror for the fact that we are in the process of committing determined suicide ecologically.

At the same time the respectful fear people have always experienced in their religion is slowly being replaced by cozy cliches, which is perhaps the reason we will pay Hollywood for the same experience. One critic put it this way, "When each sermon becomes a children's sermon, the taste for spiritual junk food expands until faith is a lollipop and theology is a Twinkie." Instead of struggling with the real issues such as peace, survival, economic equality, modern Christians are out "encountering where it's at in group gropes, or getting drenched in Pentecostal downpours of the spirit. Whereas Peter cried out, 'Depart from me, O Lord', today we cry out, 'O God, you make me feel so good'." (Theology Today, 1/80, p. 535, Religion By Cliche, Leonard Sweet).

I, for one, don't want to be so friendly and warm that I forget that I'm here to get in touch with none other than the Lord of Creation. American piety is not at all comfortable with the idea of a God mysterious enough to inspire awe. We talk piously about Him walking in the garden with us, and talking with us, and telling us we are His own, whereas if the Bible is to be trusted He is also the High and Holy one who is the sovereign Lord of all nations. Certainly He walks with us but He is also striding through the filthy streets of our slums demanding to know what we're doing about justice. In the place of Jahweh, whose name the Israelites were afraid to pronounce, American piety has substituted the "Man Upstairs".

People have met the mysterious, and have felt awe or fear - in encounter with the limits of life: both birth and death, and again our culture tilts in an opposite direction. In every age before us, both birth and death happened naturally, at home, in full view and with much personal involvement on the part of other members of the family. Today both happen, in isolation, antiseptically, rarely at home, too frequently without any contact from other members of the family. It is quite possible to live all of life and never encounter personally, birth or death - except one's own. We are insulated against the holiness - the mystery inherent in both events. Langdon Gilkey, University of Chicago theologian, who will be here for our Lenten Lecture Series, writes: "Any person who has witnessed the birth of a child has experienced the wonder, terror and ultimacy of that event...it is almost unavailable to modern men." (Naming the Whirlwind, p.318). Happily, that is changing. Yet, not long ago, hospitals relegated expectant husbands to small torture chambers called waiting rooms, full of cigarette smoke, plastic plants and three year old issues of Field and Stream - while the greatest, holiest, most awesome event in history was happening down the hall.

You cannot, I propose, witness the extremes - being born or dying - without the primal, religious fear that is elicited every time we stand at the edge of mystery. Our life, too often deprives us of it, and we need it. Threshold Experience

People have experienced God in the past in the form of an absolute moral imperative. I wish to suggest that in our concern to moderate the theological extremism which believes that God loves to send people to hell, we have, in fact, come up with a God who doesn't seem to care at all about how we behave. People before us were afraid of what would happen to them if they misbehaved, and that was not always healthy. But the reverse, the total moral neutrality of current theology may be worse. It is not a very popular topic, but may I venture to suggest that we are accountable to a just and sovereign God, and that there is every reason to fear the consequences of violating His will. My, that sounds archaic, doesn't it?

Thomas Jefferson once remarked that he shuddered for his nation when he remembered that God was just: a prophetic comment, I would suggest. We paid dearly and are still

paying dearly, I believe, for the historic evil of slavery. We have paid dearly and are today paying dearly for supporting tyranny and oppression and torture in other nations. Iran is teaching us a lesson we do not want to learn and that is that we, along with every other nation, are ultimately accountable for our behavior. I believe that is reason for fear. I believe when Peter encountered Jesus he was afraid because of the demand of overwhelming moral superiority. And I believe the idea that we are accountable to a sovereign God is viable and relevant and a matter of life and death today.

I believe we are accountable for violating, systematically and defiantly, the ecosystem - and that the law suits six states are filing against Ohio for dumping coal waste all over their farm land is only a small part of the cost. We, our children, and their children will pay. I believe we are paying and will pay for our infatuation with violence. The front page of the paper last Wednesday morning tabulated the cost: a police shooting with no explanation, a horribly violent prison riot, and in the corner of the page, the announcement that a highly paid football player - known best for injuring other players - will come to town to autograph his book Some Call Me Assassin. We're hooked on violence. We can't get enough of it. We have more guns in our bedroom drawers than anyone else in the world - and more violence, and more murder and we simply refuse to learn that it is related.

Religion might, it seems to me, venture a little old fashioned fear of God into the common life of the culture by suggesting that the Lord of Creation is just, and that He cares about peace, compassion, love - and that we are accountable for our behavior.

Life, it seems to me, may depend on our recovering the experience of Holy Terror. But the need essentially, is not external. We need the sense of a transcendent God and the awe of the Holy Terror which goes with it - in order to be fully human. Artists, poets, musicians, have always known that about us. It is true, I believe, to confess it about ourselves. We never stand taller than when we are on our knees in prayer. We are never stronger than when we confess our need for God. We are never bigger than when we acknolwedge that which is greater than we are.

Jesus Christ scared Peter to death. The good news is that when Peter, in Holy Terror, said, "Depart from me"; Jesus didn't depart. Rather He stayed, stuck it out with Peter through thick and thin. Peter's fear in the face of Christ was an important step in his growth as a man. He could come to grips with himself honestly only by acknowledging the great distance between Jesus and himself. He didn't get there with his arrogance or his presuming that he knew it all, or his physical strength. He opened his life to Jesus Christ in the very words "Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man."

So our faith, it seems to me, is best, strongest and most full of possibility when it generates what can only be called Holy Terror - when we can hear the question posed in a very wise old spiritual -

"Were you there when they crucified my lord?"
and respond honestly -
"Sometimes it causes me to tremble."

Amen.

O God, forgive us our presumptuousness. Teach us humility. Grant us grace to acknowledge what we don't know: to confess our need for you. Grant us faith to delight in your mystery and rejoice in wonder at your love: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.